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The Scarred Womb of the Futurist Woman

Although the Futurists acted very much in the spirit of a “male club”¹ and adopted a blatantly misogynistic rhetoric, several women joined the ranks of the movement and participated in all its fields of action, expressing their rebellion against traditional codes of behavior both in the personal and the artistic sphere. The first Futurist woman, Valentine de Saint Point, a Parisian painter and writer, proclaimed and celebrated an absolute sexual emancipation for women in two manifestos: the “Manifesto della Donna futurista” (1912), and the “Manifesto futurista della Lussuria” (1913). These texts railed against the hypocrisy and preconceptions of Christian morality, the mystifications of old and sterile sentimentality, as well as the political, “cerebral” mistake of Feminism.² Valorizing the stereotypical notion of the instinctive, irrational “essence” of woman by recasting it in the Futurist rhetoric of aggressive vitalism, Valentine de Saint Point celebrated woman as “the great galvanizing principle”³ in the drive towards progress, a “sublimely unjust”⁴ force of nature, playing a fundamental role in any revolution as well as in the process of natural selection. While reacting against Marinetti’s association of woman to the constraints of family, pacifism and sentimental love—obstacles to the heroic destiny of man,⁵ she nevertheless reduced women’s ambitions to the complementary and mutually exclusive roles of the selfless mother and of the inspiring lover, two roles well within the scope of action traditionally reserved to women:

La donna deve essere madre o amante. Le vere madri saranno sempre amanti mediocri, e le amanti saranno madri insufficienti per eccesso. Uguali di fronte alla vita, queste due donne si completano. La madre che riceve il figlio fa, con del passato, dell'avvenire. L'amante dispensa il desiderio che trasporta verso il futuro.⁶

Thus, this first provocative and most belligerent proclamation of emancipation blazed also the limits of the subversive trail opened by the Futurist women.

Some of the women who later joined the movement displayed non-conformist attitudes and looked for emancipation from conventional feminine roles through the short-cut of imitating the Futurist model of the "superman." For instance, Fulvia Giuliani went around in Futurist demonstrations dressed like a captain of the "Arditi" (shock troops), and the "aeropittrice" Barbara, unbeknownst to her parents, frequented an aeronautic club and became a pilot. After the war, some Futurist women even proposed the formation of groups of "Ardite."

Women writers in the movement, such as Rosa Rosa, Enif Robert, Eva Khun, Emma Malpillero and Benedetta, rebelled against the artistic and literary institutions and performed in "paroliberismo," "teatro sintetico," and "aereopoesia." The writer Maria Ginanni actually directed the paper "Italia futurista" during the war, and was active with Rosa Rosa and Enif Robert in a polemical debate against the most extreme misogynist attitudes of the men in the movement.

The works of the Futurist women were not divulged among a broad public and are now almost completely forgotten. In the rare instance of a study that addresses the topic, the critic tends to adopt a politically biased, dismissive attitude: great emphasis is placed on the reactionary political implications and affiliations of Futurism, and the women in the movement are seen as having a simply mimetic, entirely subordinated relation to the male Futurists.⁷ I believe, instead, that the Futurist experience is a significant episode in women's activity on the Italian cultural and literary scene at the beginning of the twentieth-century: the only instance of Italian women's active participation in an avant-garde movement in the pre-war period. This experience, far from being entirely reducible to a mere imitation of the discourse of the

Futurist men, projects intimate contradictions, differences and conflicts, which are instead subdued in the mainstream Futurist production.

In what follows, I will offer an analysis of Enif Robert's experimental novel *Un ventre di donna: Romanzo chirurgico*,⁸ a text raising questions that are relevant to an understanding of the Futurist women's production in general. I have proceeded in my study with two major concerns in mind: firstly, to plot the locus of the writer's cultural identity, identifying the forces that intersect her cultural field; secondly, to determine whether and at which level of the text we can speak of difference with respect to the predominantly male Futurist production.

Echoing Valentine de Saint Point's glorification of women's sexual freedom and Marinetti's attack on passèist literature, Enif Robert's novel *Un ventre di donna* proclaims loudly its emancipation from the conventions of the fashionable, predominant genre of feminine literature—the so-called “letteratura rosa”—and the dictates of bourgeois moralism. A manifesto-preface entitled “CORAGG'IO + VERITÀ” launches an attack on women writers' sentimental literature: in the spirit of the avant-garde movements, characterized by an effort to reintegrate art into life,⁹ Robert emphasizes the relationship between the two realms and rails against the hypocritical romantic rhetoric of contemporary feminine literature, as well as against the coy, mealy-mouthed women that it portrays and fosters:

Non più, per carità, sprecare tesori di bello stile per dirci che il sole è un amante divino, o che un giardino autunnale è capace di dare la verignine del piacere più intenso!

Vien voglia, leggendo queste magnifiche cretinerie, di prendere per un braccio la fluttuante scrittrice, scuoterla ben bene per riportarla in pieno verismo quotidiano, e dirle forte: “No, cara: tu fai una sostituzione bestiale di pensieri e di cose. Un bel giovanotto dalle maschie fattezze è il tuo sole e il tuo giardino. (p.XII)¹⁰

Una bella signora mia amica era da molto tempo ammalata. A me, a tutti, raccontava di disturbi nervosi, di . . . febbri del pensiero (. . .) Il ridicolo dei suoi inauditi sforzi estetici per velare il suo vero male, uccise in me la compassione.

Trovo un formidabile nesso logico fra la mia amica languidissima, affetta da tumore rettale, e le scrittrici azzurre. E mi sono convinta che

una non ultima ragione di quelle sue pietose pose lastiche andava ricercata nel genere letterario ch'ella prediligeva. Libri, giornali, riviste, dove le donne letterate sfiorano "*con dita d'azzurro*" le più inconcludenti rarità del senso che vuol parere raffinatissimo e sedicente vibrante; dove la ricerca di snobismi spirituali è così intensa da raggiungere a volte incredibili spunti di ridicolo. (pp. XIV–XV)

The alternative programme proposed is an energetic Futurist treatment of courage and truth, a new feminine literature representing a new woman freed from the taboos of bourgeois moralism:

Ma di', dunque, con rude franchezza il tuo desiderio umano e carnale, quale te lo suggerisce la tua sensibilità legittima e consapevole; parla del tuo diritto sensuale e fecondo, senza impasticciarlo con analogie di raggi e di profumi assolutamente estranei alla tua nudità che canta l'amore. (p. XIII)

This passage (as Valentine de Saint Point's manifestos) sets the limits of the proposed revolutionary move within the boundaries of the sexual sphere. The assumption that women's desires and experiences are contained entirely in their erotic longings and sexual performance is still informed by the traditional vision of separate, preordained roles for men and women, with little or no overlap between their respective spheres, and with women subordinate ("Un bel giovanotto dalle maschie fattezze è il tuo sole e il tuo giardino," p. 12).

The manifesto-preface, however, does not set the limits of the experiences and ambitions that the novel actually dramatizes. In fact, the text constitutes a literary subject—the heroine-writer—and represents an idiosyncratic experience that do not exactly conform to the models forged by male-centered culture and literature, including the male Futurists' theoretical and creative writings. Alternating narration, diary and letters (mainly exchanged between the protagonist and Marinetti, who writes from the front), Enif Robert tells the presumably autobiographical, non-aesthetic experience of fighting a terrible disease affecting her womb. At the offset, the protagonist is characterized as an uncommon, self-willed woman,¹¹ who, as a young and beautiful widow, has refused to submit to social laws and familial expectations by not remarrying. Having started a relationship with a man which

is not sufficient to fulfill her desires and confused aspirations,¹² she suffers for the boredom of her uneventful life, as well as for the symptoms of a mysterious illness. Only the daring, impetuous courting of the genial, eccentric and athletic Futurist Biego Fortis—which the protagonist *subisce* with a mixture of conflicting feelings¹³—brings a wave of vitality into the slow, sleepy rhythm of her life. The woman's health continues to deteriorate until the disease is finally diagnosed and surgery is recommended as the only way to escape death. The representation of the ensuing events—surgery, the patient's convalescence in the hospital and her struggle with painful complications which prevent recovery—hinges on the themes of courage's victory over fear, the protagonist's loss of faith in science ("la scienza arcigna," p. 78), embodied by the surgeon nicknamed "Jack lo Sventratore" ("ironico, freddo, viscido," p. 83), and her growing faith in the therapeutic power of Futurism¹⁴ which matures through readings and especially through an epistolary relationship with Marinetti. The Futurist leader, "forte e prezioso amico" (p. 127), "intuitore meraviglioso di forze latenti" (p. 129), advises a "Futurist treatment" (successively exposed in a "manuale terapeutico del desiderio-immaginazione" for the patient to memorize), which consists in increasing "i legami ardenti con la vita terrestre" (p. 124) through intensified desires. Putting into practice Marinetti's theory, the patient pursues an ambitious desire of artistic creativity ("desiderio di ebbrezze spirituali" p. 116) and writes about her surgical sensations in the Futurist style of "paroliberismo":

Sensazioni Chirurgiche.

bianco bianco bianco abbagliante chiarore di cielo di sole da finestroni lucenti [silenzio] piccole suore candidetacite sorridere di volti dolcissimi abitudine allo strazio quotidiano delle carni ammalate. Rabbrivire del corpo al contatto freddo del lettuccio di vetro—FREDDO—brivido della calda nudità e corrispondere dell'urto tortuoso al dorso al cuore forte battito vigile sospettoso . . . Affaccendarsi della piccola infermiera pratica brutta rapida sicura [silenzio] a grandi caratteri nella parete in faccia. Entrare rigido agghiacciante della "Scienza" calva fredda arcigna ansioso colpo nel cuore. (. . .) (pp. 134–135).

Successively, the protagonist submits herself to a therapeutic intercourse with the sun ("Nuda nella mia vestaglia aperta, mi corico su una

sedia a sdraio e offro il mio ventre al sole. L'astro incandescente manifesta subito la sua meravigliosa brutalità incivile avventandosi con furia selvaggia e senza diplomazie sulla mia ferita" pp. 145–146). No final recovery is represented. Instead, responding to the patient's rebellious feelings against inaction and her desire to fight ("Vorrei alzarmi, andare in guerra, in trincea, sparare, uccidermi, finirla. Sono stuuuuufa!" p. 192), Marinetti's letters develop an extensive analogy between the "war" in the wounds of the woman's womb and the battles fought in the trenches that cut the "womb" of the earth on the front line:

Navigo, guazzo, remo nel fangobroda dei camminamenti, grassi, luridi intestini di questa pianura sventrata. Tutti questi corridoi di fango conducono all'unica vasta latrina: impero austroungarico. (p. 139)

Avete torto di temere il ritorno dei 40 gradi di febbre. Bisogna acclimatarsi al pericolo.

In fondo io sono nella stessa vostra situazione. Voi inchiodata in un letto; io in una trincea fangosa, sotto la possibile pericolosa simpatia d'una palla di mitragliatrice o di una granata del San Marco.

Io, però, giro nella mia trincea col petto gonfio d'orgoglio perché tengo a guinzaglio i miei nervi sotto le scivolanti volate della morte, che balla al piano superiore, lacerando agli alberi il suo strascico di seta (. . .) (p. 171)

The last two chapters extend the potential and actual threat of disease to the wombs of other women. In "Lotta di ventri femminili," the protagonist mentally strips women passing by and elaborates a feminine typology in the form of a typology of wombs, e.g.: the passèist intellectual,¹⁵ the beautiful statuette¹⁶ and the "matrona."¹⁷ In "Il ventre di un'altra donna," instead, the drama of a woman affected by "putrefazione intestinale" is staged. Her husband's jealous protectiveness and the passèist doctors' pedantic opinion oppose a progressive doctor's surgical strategy. As the husband (by the symbolic name "principe Eutanasio De Ruderis," "cento volte milionario, avaro e maniaco" p. 209) assists to the parade of victorious troops, the doctors circle around the patient's bed in consultation. Suddenly, the crowd's outcry is heard, announcing that a Futurist "Ardito del 74° reparto d'assalto" (p. 217) has stabbed prince De Ruderis. In the emblematic

finale, the liberating gesture of the “Ardito giustiziere” (p. 217) is associated with the liberated gesture of the patient, as she proclaims her courageous choice of action:

Ma, nuda, energica e risoluta, la principessa uscì sul balcone e si sporse, gridando:

—Sono pronta! Operaatemi!

E i soldati, dimentichi dell’assassino e dell’assassinato, applaudirono freneticamente, *senza stupore*, all’apparizione, pure tanto strana, di quella meravigliosa donna ignuda. (p. 218)

The preceding synopsis should already give an idea of how the protagonist’s needs and ambitions contradict the assumption underlying the preface that women’s wishes are exclusively dominated by love and erotic longings. In fact, in the heroine’s experience, ambitious wishes of entering the male spheres of war and artistic creativity manifest themselves alongside erotic ones. Furthermore, the story is structured as a series of conflicts: the protagonist’s defying society’s laws about marriage; her confronting and fighting the unaesthetic truth of the disease hidden in her womb (assimilated to the battles fought by men on the front); and her jealous, competitive attitude versus other women’s healthy wombs.¹⁸ Significantly, all these conflicts appear to be a result of the intimate, fundamental rift experienced by the protagonist between her “masculine” will and her “feminine” body:

Ho certamente dell’ingegno. Nel guardare da questa finestra che beve tutto il golfo di Napoli, caldo, accecante e odoroso, io penso che sarei stata un poco pittore e un poco poeta, se fossi nata uomo. L’amore non mi basta. Mi sento veramente, in questo momento, poco donna.

Nulla di comune fra me e quelle flaccide, enormi matrone napoletane in costume da bagno, nere, viscide e stemperate come foche sulla sabbia, con la loro prole che guizza e bolle scodellata intorno.

Ricordo però la gioia profondamente carnale che provai otto giorni dopo il mio parto. (p. 4)

It is precisely this rift that qualifies the protagonist as an exceptional woman in her own eyes (“Ho i nervi di una donna non comune, nervi che pensano, vogliono” p. 7) and in the professional opinion of science:

Sento che i due medici, nell’andarsene, dicono a bassa voce:

—Essere stravagante . . . anormale. . . .

— . . . Resistenza fisica meravigliosa. Operazione necessarissima. . . .

— . . . Intelligenza che influenza il sangue . . . (p. 38)

—Ecco: per quanto sia difficile definirla, dirò che lei mi sembra un cervello troppo virile in un corpo troppo femminile . . . (p. 97)¹⁹

Thus the protagonist's story constitutes a transgression with respect to traditional representations of sexual roles and gender identity (or, in the case of woman, even lack of identity). However, the text blunts its potential subversiveness as the heroine associates her "deviance" (and implied superiority over the other women) with the virility of her spirit, while refusing identification with members of her sex. In fact, the same paradigms of qualities that shape Marinetti's (and traditional) opposition of masculinity and femininity also underlie any reference to gender identity in this text: in particular, the recurrent association of man with creativity, vitality, aggressiveness, and the insistent identification of the feminine nature with weakness, passivity and submissiveness. Tellingly, the womb attacked by a disease that destroys the biological "essence" of femininity—the reproductive function—becomes the emblem of woman's "constitutional" vulnerability and passivity: "Che schifo, essere un utero sofferente, mentre gli uomini si battono! E pensare che non ho nemmeno il coraggio di sopportare le iniezioni!" p. 25. Moreover, the female genitalia figure as the emblem of women's weakening influence over men:

Dio! Che orrore! Ecco un bellissimo alpino sconciamente evirato! Ho pensato che le donne viennesi rivaleggiano con le etiopiche e divorano il sesso dei prigionieri italiani. . . .

La notte dopo, la mia immaginazione si sedeva alla tavola di un arciduca, fra due elegantissimi ventri di duchesse inguainati da *toilettes* parigine che ad un tratto esplosero. (pp. 179–170)

In this passage, a moment in the treatment of "desiderio-immaginazione," the protagonist's imagination identifies the enemy's threat with the castrating power of the Austrian and Ethiopic women. And, by the same token, the explosive counterattack of Italian virility is directed against elegantly "armour-plated" women's wombs. It is easy to recognize the kinship of these images with the old fiction of the castrating, abject²⁰ woman, and especially with its Futurist version: Marinetti's representation of woman as a threat to progress, courage,

virile determination. Especially in the texts that construct the myth of the Futurist superman, woman is figured again and again as a weakening and contaminating agent, which has to be dispensed with in order to pursue a religion of “Volontà estrinsecata” and “Eroismo quotidiano.”²¹ The most emblematic and extreme embodiment of this ideal is Marinetti’s fictional hero Mafarka, who creates his superman son Gazurmah “senza il concorso e la puzzolente complicità della matrice della donna.”²² Here is an excerpt from Mafarka’s Futurist speech, where the apostle of the new religion announces that the lust for heroic death is to replace the lust for woman:

Anch’io ebbi sere d’amore nelle quali mi piacque bendarmi gli occhi con le fresche braccia di una vergine . . . E affondavo il capo fra seni profumati, per non più vedere i rimorsi multiformi che si ergevano come nubi sull’orizzonte! . . . Sì! l’amore, la donna . . . tutto ciò può nascondere per un momento il cielo e colmare il pozzo dello spazio! (. . .) Fra le braccia delle donne io sentivo il ricordo delle debolezze diurne strisciarmi sui piedi, giungermi al cuore, tasteggiandomi i nervi snodati e febbrili, mentre la mia immaginazione aveva balzi deliziosi e dorati al volo fuggitivo delle sensazioni . . . Tutto questo è il veleno della vita! (. . .) Finalmente, eccomi quale volevo essere: votato al suicidio e pronto a generare il Dio che ognuno porta nelle proprie viscere!²³

This construction of femininity, compounding connotations of impurity, corruption, limitation, and sensuality, can be read as a figure for the threats (ultimately the blurring of sexual difference) which menace (male) identity from within the self: threats that must be repressed in order for the “God” carried in every man to be born.

Robert’s text seems also to echo, in more than one way, Moebius’s *L’inferiorità mentale della donna*,²⁴ a classic in the tradition of “scientific” misogynist literature, which enjoyed a wide popularity at the time when Robert was writing. In this study, on the basis of anatomical observations, Moebius speaks of “deficienza mentale fisiologica della donna” (IM, p. 4) and claims that “ogni progresso è opera dell’uomo,” while “la donna gli grava addosso come un plumbeo peso” (IM, p. 9). Since women, by their nature, are destined to love and maternity, they do not have any intellectual talent; when they do, he argues, it is therefore a “talento mascolino” (IM, p. 57). For Moebius, the woman who violates natural and social laws by aspiring to individual realization is

an abnormal being (“l’individualismo della donna non è possibile che sopra una base morbosa,” (IM, p. 52)), and this transgression is deemed so terrible as to justify the following diagnosis: “se viene meno al suo obbligo verso la specie e vuole viveri la sua vita individuale, viene colpita come da una maledizione” (IM, p. 18). Aside from the more obvious analogies—the assumption that any intellectual talent is “mascolino,” that any woman endowed with it is “anormale” and that progress is synonymous with man—one could see an even more disquieting link between the two texts: the drama of the protagonist—the struggle of a female non-conformist individualist against a mysteriously powerful disease—seems to fulfill the verdict-diagnosis of the misogynist author.

These examples illustrate how Robert reinscribes traditional, male-centered values while representing an experience of transgression. The fundamental ambivalence that underlies the central theme of the protagonist’s exceptionality can also be found in other collateral issues thematized by the novel: in particular, the themes of maternity, marriage, and sexual life. In spite of a contemptuous representation of the Neapolitan “matrone” and their “prole,” the protagonist expresses maternal feelings and concerns for her son Carlino,²⁵ and great distress about her lost fertility:

Non mi lasci dunque nemmeno ridere, odioso nemico rifugiato là dove dovrebbe solo palpitare un largo fiore fecondo?! Tu mordi i miei figli, quelli che aspetterei formarsi sotto il getto raggianti della creazione. (p. 201)

Analogously, in spite of the initial stance against marriage, the novel basically represents a monogamous relationship with the man whose love is avowedly insufficient to satisfy the protagonist’s desires:²⁶ in fact, the only instance of “betrayal” is in the daydream, metaphorical dimension of the therapeutic intercourse with the sun:

È un amplesso avvolgente e una lacerazione insieme.

Ogni poro del mio ventre è una bocca che si apre, trema, e vorrebbe fuggire. (. . .) Tutto il sole, più vasto della terra, è nella mia ferita. Intorno, si allargano dei centri concentrici di calore decrescente, tagliati da deliziosi pruriti, e tutt’in giro ai fianchi circola una delicatissima frangia di lievissimi spasimi.

Sono spasimi di piacere, velati da sfumature di dolore. Ma il calore solare li domina, li nutre e li consola come l'affetto domina, nutre e consola le brutalità nell'amore e nei giochi violenti.

Mi sento affondare in una semi-incoscienza di svenimento, sotto la potenza massiccia del fuoco solare. (p. 146)²⁷

This passage is worth lingering on, since it raises the question of possible analogies with the imagery and language which Robert criticizes in her initial tirade against sentimental literature "a base di erotismi mascherati di grazie cesellatrici" (p. XII). In fact, this daydream is a fetishistic sublimation of the erotic act which appears to be analogous to the "sostituzione bestiale di pensieri e di cose" (p. XIII) railed against in the preface ("Non più, per carità, sprecare tesori di bello stile per dirci che il sole è un amante divino, o che un giardino autunnale è capace di dare la vertigine del piacere più intenso!" p. XII-XIII). Actually, in substance, Robert reinscribes the same idea of feminine passive submission to the divinely powerful masculine force, and displaces erotic desires in a scene of interaction with an anthropomorphic natural element. Here, however, the process of transfer is not even thinly disguised: the writer, using blatantly erotic language, refused the moralistic restraints and the "graceful" rhetoric of feminine "letteratura-fremito" (p. XII).

The quoted passage is by no means an isolated instance. The sun is repeatedly personified as the divine lover and endowed with features of the ideal man mythicized by the Futurist movement:

Ora c'è il sole, *Padrone* assoluto, testardo, solenne, cocciuto, che accarezza e stringe tutte le curve, penetra in tutte le bocche della lasciva marina posseduta, che gode imbevuta di lui. (p. 22)

IL SOLE²⁸

Dimentica te stesso . . . Slegati . . . Sciogli le tue paure. . . .
Apriti. . . . Colerà una lava di forza nella tua forma convessa levigata
succosa di frutto. (p. 148)

IL VENTRE

Perdonami; sono tuo; fa' di me ciò che vuoi. Sono quasi liberato da ogni coscienza. (. . .) Taglia! Ferisci! Lacera! Dilania! Spalanca! Sarò tuo a brandelli. Tuo! Infilzami! O stritolami! Carbonizzami! Così! Ancora! Ancora! . . . (p. 149)

Il ventre del mare aveva semplicemente partorito un delfino. O meglio un virilissimo membro divino si era insanguinato sverginando quella solitaria rada-ventre, che ora si assopiva, violazzurraverde, nella penombra umidissima. (p. 152)

Le nuvole erano vere bende di ferito, sul viso eroico, violento irruente del sole. (p. 153)

Comparing these passages with the following excerpts from Marinetti's writings, one can see that, just as she experiments in Marinetti's Futurist aesthetics of "paroliberismo," Robert frequently echoes his brash language, his rhetoric of militaristic and erotic violence, and the sadomasochistic connotations of descriptions where death and eros are identified:

Colpire col cannone equivale a un ardente amore epistolare: non si vede però, né si sente la lontanissima bocca baciata. Colpire con le bombarde, invece, equivale ad un furioso amplesso radiotelegrafico o, meglio, ad un bacio telefonico. (p. 140)²⁹

Mafarka correva or qua or là, sulle creste degli scogli, eccitando alla voluttà di morire tutte quelle vite che si contorcevano in delizie sul corpo sussultante della grande Dea nera. (. . .) Egli aveva la voce rauca e singhiozzante dell'uomo che a forza di carezze spinge la carne della sua amante adorata verso uno spasimo terribile, dicendole: "Godi! Godi, amore mio! . . . Godi dappertutto! . . . Nelle tue mammelle e nelle tue bocche rosee! . . . Tu soffri dal piacere, non è vero? . . . Oh! soffri ancora! . . ." ³⁰

Having observed that Robert reinscribes traditional and Futurist male-centered values couching them in a rhetoric of Marinettian flavor, we can not simply conclude that the text does not differ in any significant way from the production of the other male Futurist writers. The more obvious difference is to be located at the level of thematic structures, which are traversed by the fundamental intimate rift experienced by the protagonist. Given the ambivalence associated with her exceptional status (hysterical behavior, diseased body, confused gender identity), the protagonist is not an exceptional individual in the way that Marinetti's Futurist superman is. Texts by male futurist writers typically tend to construct the myth of a virile, self-assertive and aggressive individual emancipated from all intimate and external limitations.

Problematization is eschewed by defining the new hero in antithesis with passeist values and femininity, i.e., by casting out both the female and the effeminate, politically moderate male scapegoats. On the contrary, Robert's text problematizes the identity of the heroine, placing her in an uneasy, unstable position between the masculine and the feminine poles: the boundary line dividing the two polarized spaces cuts through her, symbolized by the central image of the incurable, scar in the womb. Ultimately, then, a less patent, but not a less significant site of difference is the one of the text's political stakes. The Futurist heroine is not proposed as a model of emancipation to other women in the way that the Futurist hero is: in fact, her exceptionality results in feelings of supercilious detachment versus other members of her sex. The area of experiences and aspirations shared with the other female characters is limited to the physical and sexual sphere: gossip about sexual experiences, competitive desire of attracting the other sex, and vulnerability to the disease potentially hidden in their womb. In the spiritual sphere of ambitious, artistic, aggressive aspirations, the protagonist relates only to the Futurist writer Marinetti, who demiurgically shapes her entrance into the literary world, and to whom she displays a hero-worshipping attitude.³¹

In conclusion, the novel offers a story of inner conflicts and malaise which we cannot find in the male Futurists' texts: the experience of a woman overstepping the boundaries of her preordained role and entering the sphere of culture and self-affirmation. However, the rebellion is channeled out of the social and political ground into the turbulent stream of avant-garde artistic experience. The "cure" proposed by this text (unleashed creative imagination, *paroliberismo*), allegorizes the limits of the strategy generally adopted by the Futurist women: to follow an avant-garde practice prescribed by a male-centered movement which does not seriously threaten the social organization of gender.

An analysis of writing by and about women in Futurism can actually expose ideological underpinnings of the Futurist aesthetic revolution. Marinetti's manifesto on "words in freedom" loudly proclaims a will to clear the linguistic ground and to open an infinite space for the "multiplied" individual by destroying the barriers of traditional syntax and the old tyrannic idol—the literary "I." However, this move

turns out to be only apparently iconoclastic: in fact, paradoxically, the Futurist “dynamic,” “liberated” text predicates a new tyrannic (masculine) subject, erects a new monolithic idol with a monopoly in value univocally defined in a closed-in ideological space.

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Notes

1. “a male club with a puerile and indeed sinister insistence on aggressive virility” (Caroline Tisdall and Angelo Bozzolla, *Futurism* (London: Thames and Hudson Ltd., 1977), p. 157.)

2. “L’attribuire dei doveri alla donna equivale a farle perdere tutta la sua potenza feconda. I ragionamenti e le deduzioni del Femminismo non distruggeranno la sua fatalità primordiale; non possono far altro che falsarla e costringerla a manifestarsi attraverso deviazioni che conducono ai peggiori errori.” (Valentine de Saint Point, *Manifesto della Donna futurista*, in Claudia Salaris, *Le futuriste* (Milano: edizioni delle donne, 1982), p. 34.)

3. “la donna è ugualmente il grande principio galvanizzante al quale tutto è offerto” (Valentine de Saint Point, *Manifesto futurista della lussuria*, in Salaris, p. 38.)

4. “DONNE, RIDIVENTATE SUBLIMEMENTE INGIUSTE, COME TUTTE LE FORZE DELLA NATURA!” (Valentine de Saint Point, *Manifesto della Donna futurista*, in Salaris, p. 34.)

5. It should be noticed that this programme of female emancipation was substantially in line with Marinetti’s demands for women rights like equal pay, sexual freedom, easy divorce and release from the “legal prostitution” of marriage. However, spelling out the motives that underlined these goals, he repeatedly indicated woman as an obstacle to the realization of the Futurist ideal—the breeding of aggressive, energetic individuals released from the weakening effect of sentimental passion and of the parliamentary system: “La donna non appartiene a un uomo, ma bensì all’avvenire e allo sviluppo della razza. Noi vogliamo che una donna ami un uomo e gli si conceda per il tempo che vuole; poi, non vincolata da contratto, né da tribunali moralistici, metta alla luce una creatura che la società deve educare fisicamente e intellettualmente ad un’alta concezione di libertà italiana. Una sola educatrice basta a favorire e difendere senza costrizione il primo sviluppo di 100 bambini. (. . .) Verrà completamente abolita quella atmosfera di piagnucolamenti e di mani aggrappate alle gonne e di baciucchiamenti morbosi che costituiscono la prima fanciullezza. (. . .) I bambini

maschi devono—secondo noi—svilupparsi lontano dalle bambine perchè i loro primi giuochi siano nettamente maschili, cioè privi di ogni morbosità affettiva, d'ogni delicatezza donnesca, vivaci, battaglieri, muscolari, e violentemente dinamici. La convivenza di bambini e bambine produce sempre un ritardo nella formazione del carattere dei bambini che immancabilmente subiscono il fascino e la seduzione imperativa della piccola femmina come piccoli cicisbei o piccoli schiavi instupiditi." (Filippo Tommaso Marinetti, *Democrazia futurista*, in *Teoria e invenzione futurista* (Milano: Arnoldo Mondadori Editore, 1968), p. 370.)

6. Valentine de Saint Point, *Manifesto della Donna futurista*, in Salaris, p. 35.

7. See Anna Nozzoli, "Le donne del posdomani" in *Tabù e coscienza* (Firenze: La Nuova Italia, 1978), cap. II: "La scarsa presenza femminile all'interno del gruppo futurista, l'esiguità anche numerica dei risultati prodotti, sono infatti altrettante ragioni che limitano l'opera della Ginanni, della Rosa, di Benedetta, nei confini angusti della 'curiosità letteraria.'" (p. 41); "le aspettative di quanti sperassero in singolari casi di femminismo letterario all'interno della misoginia futurista, risultano inevitabilmente deluse, e forse non poteva essere altrimenti, data la prepotente ambiguità delle posizioni marinettiane, il consenso incondizionato che esse esercitarono su quasi tutte le scrittrici." (p. 43).

8. Enif Robert and Filippo Tommaso Marinetti, *Un ventre di donna* (Milano: Facchi, 1919). In the title page, Marinetti's name precedes the one of "Signora ENIF ROBERT" conferring to the authoress a subordinated role. This impression is reinforced by the fact that Marinetti's seal of approval follows Robert's signature at the end of her preface in the following fashion:

"Approvo incondizionatamente.
F. T. Marinetti
futurista"

9. Cfr. Peter Burger, *Theory of the Avant-Garde* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1984), passim.

10. The page numbers indicated in parentheses refer to the quoted edition.

11. "Non sono pazza. Ho i nervi di una donna non comune, nervi che pensano, vogliono, si avviticchiano e si staccano, si arrampicano sull'impossibile, e che l'amore non può soddisfare." (p. 7).

12. "In realtà, lo adoro. Ma il mio spirito scontento, ironico, scatta via, mentre egli mi bacia con tenerezza, e si slancia altrove, cercando, frugando, lontano, vicino, nel passato, nel futuro, in fondo a me stessa, un'altra realtà, un'altra gioia, un capriccio senza forma, un altro uomo, senza corpo e senza voce, un tipo astratto . . . una pazzia, insomma." (p. 4).

13. "Soffocata, annientata, stupitissima, lo subii. Fortis si staccò da me ed uscì sul balcone. Io non seppi né gridare, né ribellarmi. Feroce contro me stessa, contenta e scontenta insieme, mi alzai e andai a coricarmi, in camera mia. Giulio mi trovò a letto, irritatissima, colla febbre," (p. 13).

14. "I futuristi che aprono *simbolicamente* i cranii duri, per saettarvi la scintilla del

genio dinamico, creatore di ardimenti vertiginosi, sono meno matti di voi, freddi squartatori di ventri bianchi, che troppe volte *studiate* sulla viva carne palpitante!" (p. 142).

15. "Il suo ventre isterico, dagli scomposti sussulti, dritto, piatto, oscuro, ruvido, è difeso da una finta corazza romantica. Sulle accese fioriture del sesso, ella scarabocchia platoniche offerte di sensualità spirituale. e trova chi ci crede!" (p. 202).

16. "Un palpitare gioioso di bianchezze plastiche; fremiti di salute e di godimento nella ricchezza dei riflessi biondi e ricciuti" (p. 203).

17. "Ecco una matrona che raccoglie penosamente in un corset-corazza le placide onde rilassate e pesanti di un ventre stanco. Spoglio anche questa. . . . Ampiezza di superficie bruna. Pelle distesa, con macchie più scure; sembra la buccia screpolata di un frutto che abbia contenuto troppa polpa," (p. 204).

18. "E perché tutte le altre donne, quelle che io vedo passare snelle nel solco scintillante dell'ammirazione maschile, perché, loro, *stanno bene*, e io no?" (p. 203).

19. This definition appears to echo Richard von Krafft-Ebing's famous construct of lesbians as being endowed of a male soul in a female body. See George L. Mosse, *Nationalism and Sexuality* (New York: Howard Fertig, 1985), p. 39.

20. I am using the term "abject" in the sense defined by Julia Kristeva, particularly in *Powers of Horror* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1982), where the phenomenon of the repudiation of femininity, anti-semitism, rituals of defilement and phobias are traced back to the fundamental psychic process of the subject's accession to meaning and identity: "The abject confronts us (. . .) with our earlier attempts to release the hold of *maternal* entity even before ex-isting outside of her, thanks to the autonomy of language. It is a violent, clumsy breaking away, with the constant risk of falling back under the sway of a power as securing as it is stifling." (p. 13). This primal process of repression, separation and rejection results in "an intrinsically corporeal and already signifying brand, symptom, and sign: repugnance, disgust, abjection." (p. 11). The Ego, its objects and representations "arrive only *a posteriori* on an enigmatic foundation that has been already marked off; its return, in a phobic, obsessional, psychotic guise, or more generally and in more imaginary fashion in the shape of *abjection* notifies us of the limits of the human universe." (p. 11). The concept of modern literature: "contemporary literature (. . .) when it is written as the language, possible at last, of that impossible constituted either by a-subjectivity or by non-objectivity, propounds, as a matter of fact, a sublimation of abjection. Thus it becomes a substitute for the role formerly played by the sacred, at the limits of social and subjective identity." (p. 26).

21. Filippo Tommaso Marinetti, *Mafarka il futurista*, in *Teoria e invenzione futurista*, p. 262.

22. Filippo Tommaso Marinetti, *Mafarka il futurista*, p. 261.

23. Filippo Tommaso Marinetti, *Mafarka il futurista*, pp. 264-265.

24. Paul Julius Moebius, *L'inferiorità mentale della donna* (Torino: Einaudi, 1978). The quotes refer to this edition (abbreviated in the text as IM). The pamphlet was first published in Germany in 1900; it was translated into Italian in 1904.

25. "Mi avvento con tutto il cuore verso di lui, il mio tesoro lontano, che ora riderà coi cuginetti, senza l'ombra di un pensiero triste. Domani, potrebbe essere orfano. . . . Crescere senza la sua mamma. . . ." p. 54.

26. See note 12.

27. Mosse (ch. 3, "The Rediscovery of the Human Body") observes that the exposure of human bodies to the healing power of the sun is a fundamental aspect of a *fin-de-siècle* movement of rebellion against bourgeois respectability. In the German volkish right, and particularly in the so-called "life-reform" movement, nudism and the celebration of the sun were associated with the mystique of national and racial regeneration, so that the rediscovery of the human body was ultimately stripped of its menace to the establishment (nationalism, respectability). One might argue that Futurism made an analogous move in integrating revolutionary stances and new myths into the ideology of national regeneration.

28. This excerpt and the following one are part of a dialogue between the sun and the womb imagined by the patient. The fourth passage represents the protagonist's perceptions as she watches the scene of a dolphin dying on the shore.

29. From one of Marinetti's letters to the protagonist.

30. Filippo Tommaso Marinetti, *Mafarka il futurista*, p. 226.

31. The idea that friendships among women are not to be taken seriously is a long-standing one: in the eighteenth century, "the new and popular science of phrenology reflected general opinion when it sought proof through the study of the brain that women made friends only among men and never with other "women." (Mosse, p. 68).